

SACRED SPACES AND EXPRESSIVE BODIES: AT THE *URS* OF
LAL SHAHBAZ QALANDAR

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The shrine of Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is located in the rural city of Sehwan in Sindh, Pakistan. Sehwan is a site of pilgrimage for thousands of devotees at the annual festival known as *urs*, spanning three days to commemorate the death anniversary of the saint. Men, women, and transgender participants engage in many rituals at the *urs* among which the prominent is devotional dancing called *dhamaal*. This thesis project relates sacredness of spaces and hyper-reality of the festival with the performances of rituals that involve diverse publics. At the *urs* and otherwise, the shrine space provides devotees, largely poor, a collective non-verbal expression in the form of *dhamaal*. *Dhamaal* gives expression to the body in a society that does not normally encourage such expressions in the public sphere. This thesis argues that the Sufi discourse in Sehwan makes the body of a devotee an expressive body.

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Dedicated to the rich cultural heritage of Pakistan

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Islam & Sufism.....	5
Pakistan, Sindh, and Sehwan.....	10
Lal Shahbaz Qalandar.....	13
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	18
III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS.....	27
Spaces.....	27
Bodies.....	32
IV. METHOD.....	39
V. FINDINGS.....	48
VI. ANALYSIS.....	66
Space.....	66
Performance.....	70
Embodied Expression.....	73
VII. CONCLUSION.....	79
REFERENCES CITED.....	81

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I am burning with Divine love every moment.
Sometimes I roll in the dust,
And sometimes I dance on thorns.
I have become notorious in your love.
I beseech you to come to me!
I am not afraid of the disrepute,
To dance in every bazaar.

- Lal Shahbaz Qalandar

It is evening time in Sehwan, a small city in the province of Sindh, in the South of Pakistan. The courtyard of a shrine is packed with men, women, and some transgender participants. As soon as the call for prayer ends, the sound of drums starts filling the air. The crowd starts moving to the beats of drums. From a top corner of the courtyard, all one can see is a sea of people and their heads and hands. Their hands are raised up in the air with index fingers pointing towards the sky while the rest are closed like a fist. Hands move in conjunction with the motion of their bodies. As they move their right leg they raise their right hand in the sky. They lower their right hand and raise the left with the motion of the left leg. As drums beat faster their motion becomes more frenetic. They start moving their heads to and fro while moving their

bodies. This is *dhamaal*, a dance performed by devotees in spiritual ecstasy. Men, women, and transgender, all in unison, are expressing their devotion to their Sufi saint. The saint is Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and the occasion is his death anniversary known as *urs*.

Mohammad Osman Marwandi, popularly known as Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, was a Sufi saint who traveled to Sindh, Pakistan. He settled in a town called Sehwan Sharif where he is said to have died at the age of 112 in 1274 AD (Mohammad, 1978). His burial site has been developed into a shrine which millions of his devotees and followers visit all year round. The shrine particularly attracts thousands of devotees every year at an annual festival called *urs*, spanning three days to celebrate Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's death anniversary. *Urs* is an Arabic word meaning "marriage." In Sufism, the death anniversary of a saint is called *urs* because a Sufi's death symbolizes his union with the Divine.

At the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar all year round and at the annual occasion of the *urs*, *dhamaal* is performed among other rituals. Though dancing is central to Sufism, *dhamaal* is particular to some South Asian Sufi orders (Schmidle, 2008). Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is known to have performed a dance similar to the one popularly known as the

whirling dance of the dervishes in Turkey but of a different style (Mohammad, 1978). To this day, his followers and pilgrims follow dancing ritual as a way to express their devotion and spirituality. *Dhamaal* is thus an expression of the body even though traditional Pakistani society and religious orthodoxy does not encourage such manifestations of bodily nature. However, performing *dhamaal* in public by all and sundry including women is an acceptable practice within the space of the shrine particularly at the occasion of the *urs*.

Pakistan is a Muslim majority country. Since its independence in 1947, Islam has been a major part of Pakistan's identity. However, how Islam is practiced in many parts of the country varies from strict orthodoxy in mosques to popular Sufism at shrines. Sufism and shrine culture has been a popular part of religious practices of many Pakistanis but strict orthodoxy has gained prominence in Pakistani society over the last three decades. As ramifications of Pakistan's involvement in global politics such as the Afghan war against the Soviet Union and later the War on Terror, a wave of religious extremism has swept the country. Shrines have been the targets of bomb blasts in many parts of the country over the last couple of years by Pakistani Taliban and other extremist groups. The

country's middle class also largely disassociated itself from the shrine culture adopting a condescending attitude towards activities at shrines practiced by the poor. Shrine culture is dubbed as pagan and heretic by the extremists and superstitious and ignorant by the middle-class.

As the general attitude of the society tilted towards extremist religious interpretations, attitudes towards certain social practices such as music and dance, participation of women, and acceptability of transgender changed. All of these elements have been crucial part of Sufi practices at many shrines where musical performances, *dhamaal*, and participation of socially marginalized groups such as women, transgender, and minorities are encouraged.

In this context, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine in Sehwan is an important social space because it allows men and women to express their spirituality through their bodies. During the *urs*, expressions of bodies extend beyond this shrine space into the city space. Unlike orthodoxy that restricts any ecstatic expression, this space allows transcendence to the body. This scenario raises many questions: How do spaces such as shrines allow transgressions that are normally disapproved by the patriarchal society and religious orthodoxy? What does this dancing and public display of bodily expression mean to

everyone in general and women in particular? Is this an expression of resistance and freedom for the poor and the marginalized? Why is an expressive body important in the socially conservative climate of Pakistan? This research project seeks to examine and understand the phenomenon of expressive bodies and their connection with spaces at the *urs* and beyond.

The project relies on ethnographic research methods to study and explore performance of rituals including *dhamaal* by male, female, and transgender participants. The study focuses on the three-day festival *urs* that takes place on the 18th of *Shaban*, the 8th month of the Islamic calendar. This research also explores moments other than those at the *urs*. This study thus aims to contribute to the literature on Sufi discourse in South Asia and Pakistan by exploring issues of performance, space, and embodied expression.

Islam & Sufism

The Islamic belief system is based on two basic principles, oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. All Muslims including Sufis consider the Quran as their guide, which was revealed to the prophet Muhammad. After Muhammad's demise in 632 A.D., the Islamic empire developed under the rules of the first four Caliphs: Abu Bakar, Umar, Uthman, and 'Ali. However, the succession of the Islamic

Caliphate after the prophet was a disputed matter and became a source of schism in the Islamic community. A group of Muslims who considered 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, as the true successor to the Prophet became his staunch supporters. This group later became the minority Shiite sect while the majority of Muslims belong to the Sunni sect. After the murder of Ali, the Umayyad Dynasty, the Abbasid dynasty, and the Ottomans ruled the Islamic empire. Currently, the Muslim world exists in the form of many nation states in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Islamic law, known as *sharia*, developed in the two centuries after the death of the Prophet. *Sharia* is a body of rules based on interpretation of the Quran and Prophet's sayings known as *Hadith*. *Sharia* developed in the form of four legal schools: Hanifi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali (Schimmel, 1992). These schools belong to the Sunni sect while the Shiite school is called Jafaria. These schools prescribe various rules and regulations about a range of issues: prayers, charity, inheritance, marriage, divorce, punishment for adultery, etc. All schools are considered equally valid for their respective followers. However, the degree of strictness of rules varies among these schools with Hanbalites offering the strictest interpretation. In the eighteenth century, Muhammad ibn Abdal-Wahhab extended

the Hanbali School in the form of Wahhabism (Schimmel, 1992). The austere Wahhabism is adhered to in countries like Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia holds important position in the Muslim World due to its oil-based economic power. During the last century this Wahhabi understanding has been exported to other Muslim countries like Pakistan through various means such as *dawah* (preaching) movements and funding of *madrasahs* (religious schools) and mosques. It is also the same school that rejects veneration of saints and mysticism in Sufism (Schimmel, 1992; Frembgen, 2008).

Sufism and its mystical practices can be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad. The term Sufi is derived from the Arabic root word *Suf* that means wool. Prophet Muhammad and some Sufi practitioners used to wear clothes made of wool. However, the term Sufism did not become widely accepted until the tenth century (Frembgen, 2010). The early history of Sufism has its roots in the ascetic movements in the Islamic community. This asceticism found bases in the idea of complete and blind trust in God. Sufis therefore indulged in practices like fasting, night vigils, and disregard for material possessions. Later, the concept of love for God became a central theme as the movement developed. "The Sufis commonly express the quest for God in the language of love" (Chittick, 2009, p.45). There are

many well-known mystics such as Rumi, Rabia Al Basri, Hallaj, Ghazali, Attar and Ibn-al Arabi who have written volumes on divine love and its connection to human love. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is among those mystics who expressed their love of divine through poetry, meditation, dancing, and love for humanity.

Among the Sufis who wrote about its ideology, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) is considered prominent. He was trained in theology but was finding it difficult to reconcile with many of the theological currents of his time and eventually found solace in mysticism (Schimmel, 1992). After Ghazali's demise the idea of Sufi brotherhoods or Sufi orders gained acceptance. These brotherhoods provided spaces for people to congregate and do communal activities such as *dhikr*, performance of remembrance of God. With the development of Sufi orders, Sufism became a mass movement, gaining acceptance far and wide in the Islamic world. Some of the key Sufi orders are: Qadirriyya, Rifaiyya, Chishtiyya, Meveleviyya, Qalandariya, Suhrawardiyya, etc.

In Sufi praxis, there is a master who guides his/her disciples in their spiritual growth. The term used for a male master is *Shaikh* and *Shaikha* for females. In Sufism women can also attain the status of sainthood. In most places such as Sindh and North Africa, women are welcomed

as participants in the Sufi rituals at Sufi lodges and shrines. The formal process of associating oneself to a Sufi order is through initiation.

Sufism is the spiritual path of finding the Divine. Sufis believe that "God manifests Himself in the most infinitesimal parts of His creation" (Frembgen, 2008, p.5). Sufis go on an inner quest to find God and travel through different paths and stages. Those who find God become intoxicated in His love. The final stage in the Sufi path is the union with the Divine Beloved, known as *fanaa* (Frembgen, 2008). This is why when a mystic dies, his death is considered as 'mystical nuptial' or *urs* with God. Hence, death anniversaries of all Sufi saints are celebrated instead of mourned because the nuptial is considered a joyous occasion.

Sufism is considered a part of Islam but differs from orthodox praxis in a number ways. For instance, orthodoxy – both Sunni and Shia – does not encourage dancing and music in its practice. Sufism, on the other hand, uses music and dancing as a means to connect to the Divine. Sufis talk about music through the concept of "*Samaa*" or "Audition" and believe that *Samaa* is "the secret language of God's luminous, audible signs" (Chittick, 2009, p. 111). Similarly, dancing has been a part of some Sufi orders.

Rumi, a prominent thirteenth century poet and mystic, explains dancing as something that takes place in Sufis' "hearts and spirits" (Chittick, 2009, p. 113). The whirling dervishes in Turkey known for their spiritual dancing ritual belong to the Meveleviyya order that follows Rumi's philosophies. In many parts of South Asia, devotees perform a dance, *dhamaal*, slightly different from Meveleviyya order's style of dance. In Pakistan *dhamaal* is performed at almost all shrines, although shrines in Sehwan are considered key spaces for this performance because devotional dance is closely associated with Lal Shahbaz Qalandar.

Pakistan, Sindh, and Sehwan

Pakistan became an independent state in 1947 for the Muslim majority areas in the Indian subcontinent. Hence, Islam became the religion of the majority. Sufism, with its strong roots in the subcontinent, remained a strong force of spirituality. Shrines of many saints can be found in all four provinces of Pakistan.

Sindh, one of the four provinces of Pakistan, is in the south of the country. Sindh took its name from the river *Sindhu* (also known as Indus) which flows through present-day Pakistan from north to south. Sindh province comprises the lower valley of the river Indus. The Indus

Valley civilization is centuries old with the ruins of *Mohen-jo-Daro* dating back to 4000-3000 BC. The region of Sindh has an interesting history of three thousand years of conquests and invasions (Bunting, 1980). Alexander the Great invaded Sindh in 326-325 BC and built various garrison towns. He is believed to have laid the foundations of the city of Sehwan (Baloch, 1975). The Indus valley has been associated with many other kingdoms and empires whose seats of government have been situated in Persia, Greece, Turkistan, Arabia, and Iraq (Baloch, 1975). All these rulers left their mark on the valley and on the culture and traditions of its inhabitants.

Sufis came to Sindh to spread the message of Islam much before Muslim conquerors came here. The Muslim conquest of South Asia started with the invasion of Sindh. Mohammad bin Kassim invaded the region in 711 AD (Bunting 1980) and brought it under Umayyad rule (Baloch, 1975). Sindh remained under the Umayyad and the Abbasid caliphates for nearly two hundred years following its conquest (Baloch, 1975). Afterwards, different local rulers continued to control the region until British colonial rulers took its reign from 1843 to 1947 (Baloch, 1975).

All provinces of Pakistan, including Sindh, are divided into districts. The city of Sehwan is in Dadu

district, which is flanked by mountain ranges on the West and the Indus river on the East (Mohammad, 1978). Sehwan was a major river trade port due to its proximity to the Indus. Sehwan was originally called "*Sev-Ashtan* or *Sev-Wahan*, the abode of Seva" (Mohammad, 1978, p. 1). It is said that the Hindu temple of Seva once existed where the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar has been built. This is one of the reasons why Hindus and Muslims alike venerate the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan (Doctor, 1985). It also reflects the philosophy of inclusion that the mystic himself followed in his life.

Due to the lack of documentary evidence, it is difficult to say who exactly started building the shrine. However, most rulers of Sindh contributed to the development of the shrine starting with the Tughlaqs in 1353, emperor Shahjehan in 1636, and Kalhoros and Talpurs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively (Mohammad, 1978).

Influential *Syed* families have been taking care of shrines in the country. Syed families claim their lineage to the saint and the family of the Prophet Muhammad through his son-in-law 'Ali. Later, disputes arose regarding the management of the shrines and their funds. The Pakistan government took control of many shrines under its Auqaaf

department, a division of the government within the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Most governments beginning with Ayub Khan's in 1958 adopted a policy of support for shrines in the country. Unlike some other Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia where shrine culture is suppressed forcibly, shrine culture in Pakistan developed under the aegis of successive governments.

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine also continued to receive government support in the development of its structure. Currently, Qalandar's shrine stands as a monumental structure adorned with beautiful tiled walls and marble floors. One of the entrances has a door made of gold gifted by the Iranian government in the 1970s. As Sehwan's main attraction is Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, the town's economy relies on the influx of visitors throughout the year and particularly during the *urs*.

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar

Biographical information about Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is not present in the form of a book. Most of the accounts related to his life can be found in different historical sources related to his time. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar was born as Muhammad Usman Marwandi in a small town in Tabriz called Marwand, in the province of Azerbaijan. Because of his association with the town Marwand, his name became Muhammad

Osman Marwandi. His family lineage goes back to the Prophet Muhammad and 'Ali. He belonged to the Ismaili sect, a branch of Shia Islam (Qazi, 1971).

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar attained his early education in his hometown and learnt the holy book, the Quran, at a young age. He was very fond of traveling and journeyed to Mecca and Medina in present day Saudi Arabia, and eventually travelled to Sindh. There are various opinions about his journey to Sindh, but Sehwan is the town where he settled. Sehwan was considered to be a den of all sorts of evils and problems when Lal Shahbaz Qalandar came to settle there. With his Sufi practices and gentle nature he won the hearts and minds of the people of Sehwan (Mahar, 2012).

Some of the information about Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is difficult to authenticate as historians have made merely educated guesses about his Sufi background. Three prominent contemporaries of Lal Shahbaz include Bahauddin Zakarai Suhrawardy Multani, Jalauddin Surkh Bukhari of Uch Sharif and Baba Farid of Pakpattan Sharif. Together, these four Sufi saints have been mentioned in history books as *Char Yar* (four friends) who traveled to different parts of Indo-Pakistan and spread the message of Islam and Sufism (Mahar, 2002). Among them, Baba Farid belonged to the Chishtiyya Sufi order, well known for its musical gatherings known as

Samaa. However, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's association with a particular Sufi order cannot be confirmed with complete authority. Since many Suhrawardiyya saints first settled in Sindh and were among Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's contemporaries and friends, he might have associated himself with the Suhrawardiyya order (Qazi, 1971). Bahauddin Zakarai Shrawardy Multani is said to have taken him under his spiritual guidance (Mahar, 2002). Since he is also known with the title of Qalandar, some historians associate him with the Qalandariya order of the Sufis.

According to all historical accounts, he was never married and lived as a bachelor devoted to the spiritual life of a Sufi. Many miracles, legends, and stories have been associated with him, hinting at his mystical powers. The color red, *lal*, has been associated with him, which is why one of his titles is Lal or red Sufi. It is said that he used to wear red clothes. It has also been reported that his eyes used to get red in the ecstatic state. His second title of Shahbaz (royal falcon) is associated with him because of the mystical and spiritual heights he attained. This is reflected in his own poetry: "I am the royal falcon, that has no (fixed) place i.e. I am always in flight; I cannot be contained in any place; I am the

phoenix, that cannot be restrained in any symbol or form" (Qazi, 1971, p. 26).

The third title associated with saint's name is Qalandar. Muhammad Hussain bin Khalaf Tabrizi, the writer of a famous Persian dictionary defines Qalandar as someone "so much spiritualized that he is free from social and customary inhibitions and taboos" (Mohammad, 1978, p.7). Many other references have used terms like, "intoxicated in spirituality" to define the term Qalandar. The title of Qalandar has been associated with three saints, Lal Shahbaz, saint Bu Ali Sharfuddin of Panipat and a female saint Rabia Basri (Mohammad, 1978).

The term Qalandar is also connected to the *fakirs* or *malangs*, the Sufi mendicants. They are considered as itinerant dervishes and usually do not associate with any particular order. However, those in Sehwan are believed to be associated with Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. These *fakirs* and *malangs* are now found in lodges in Sehwan located next to the shrine of Sikander Bodla Bahar close to the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Bodla Bahar is known as Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's most faithful disciple.

The ecstatic dancing of Lal Shahbaz in the presence of prince Sultan Khan Shaheed has been mentioned in a historical book Tarikh-e-Firuz Shahi, a history of the

Muslim monarch Firuz Shah Tughlak, in 1357 AD (Qazi, 1971). Ecstatic *dhamaal* is considered a gift of God to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar because of which he is given a high stature among mystics. The practice of *dhamaal* to the beat of drums continues to this day at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and at his disciple Bodla Bahar's shrine. During the *urs*, performances of *dhamaal* become intense as thousands of devotees take part in it. The practice continues throughout the year without failing except for the ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, when Muslims mourn the murder of the Prophet's grandson and 'Ali's son Husain.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are few studies done on the *urs* of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar although the annual festival has recently garnered attention of some scholars and journalists. Jurgen Wasim Frembgen is among those few who have written extensively on different aspects of Sufism in Pakistan such as popular devotional posters, Sufi music, Sufi shrines, and dervishes. In his book, *At the Shrine of the Red Sufi* (2011), Frembgen gives an anthropological account of his visit to the shrine of the Sufi saint during the *urs*.

Frembgen's approach is embedded in the method of participant observation. He participated in the festival dressed in traditional clothes like other pilgrims, stayed in uncomfortable tents instead of a hotel and spent five days with other pilgrims observing them and their activities. He gives vivid and detailed descriptions of the whole event.

Frembgen explains the rituals, ceremonies, activities, and performances of the pilgrims at the festival including devotional dancing, chanting, and the use of drugs. He describes the locations, habits, and customs of the people visiting the shrine from all over the country. He also

highlights the participation of marginalized social groups such as women, transgender participants, and religious minorities in the rituals. Frembgen describes how women participate in the performance and rituals and experience spirituality alongside male members at the pilgrimage site in Sehwan.

Though Frembgen's work comes exclusively from an anthropological perspective yet it offers a valuable insight into this festival. However, Frembgen's overall approach is neither interpretive nor analytical. He poses questions about different activities but does not look for answers or attempts to provide explanations. For example, noting the dancing ritual of women at the festival he asks: "Where else in this society do women have the opportunity to find expression for the vitality of their bodies, if not here in this parallel world of the Qalandar shrine" (Frembgen, 2011, p.122).

Considering Pakistan's strategic importance in the region, its participation in the war on terror since 9/11 and its volatile situation, many journalists focused their attention on Pakistan in the last decade trying to cover different aspects of Pakistani society. Nicholas Schmidle (2008 & 2009) who wrote on Pakistan's political situation attended the *urs* and reported the event and its dancing

rituals. Similarly, Declan Waslh (2007) called the annual festival "the country's biggest party." These journalistic accounts on this event were meant to highlight the tolerant side of Islam practiced by the countrymen at the Sufi festivals and shrines.

There are other scholars who have worked on different aspects of shrine culture in Sehwan Sharif other than the *urs*. Michelle Boivin (2012) has focused more on the material culture of Sehwan. He identifies a repertoire of artifacts that give meaning to the traditions and practices of devotees in Sehwan. Frembgen (2006) has written about popular posters used in the Sufi culture that includes posters of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. He has provided a textual reading of those posters in historical and socio-cultural context.

Apart from essays that relate directly to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, other scholarly and artistic work has also been done on other Sufi shrines and festivals in South Asia. Richard Wolfe has worked on the *urs* of Madho Lal Husain in Lahore, Pakistan. Madho is another saint and poet whose name has Lal (red) as a title apart from Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Similarly, *dhamaal* is also performed at the *urs* of Madho Lal. Wolfe has analyzed the phenomenon of *dhamaal*, dancing and drumming among *fakirs*, the mendicant Sufis at

Madho Lal's shrine and beyond. He has analyzed the "social poetics" by looking at specific gestures, use of language, and drum rhythms in their meaning-making process at Madho Lal's *urs* and elsewhere.

Samina Quraeishi (2010) has looked at the shrines in South Asia and defined them as "sacred spaces." Her photographs and essays represent her journey in India and Pakistan outlining a basic understanding of prominent Sufis and poets such as Shah Latif Bhitai of Sindh, Data Ganj Bakhsh Hujwiri of Lahore, Khawaja Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, and Nizamuddin Auliya in India. She describes the unique culture that surrounds each saint's shrine. While her photographs depict the culture visually, her words provide anthropological accounts of her observations interwoven with historical background on each Sufi.

Pnina Werbner (2011) also looks at pilgrimage to Sufi lodges and Sufi festivals, focusing at the shrine of Zindapir, in Ghamkol Sharif, Pakistan. She claims that such festivals and pilgrimages create an egalitarian culture at the shrines. She argues that people from different geographic locations and ethnic backgrounds come to attend festivals or visit shrines and as a result create a nation building environment without claiming any explicit nationalist or pan-Islamic religious ideology. Werbner

claims that these festivals not only welcome different sects and religions but also create a moral community across class, region, and gender, encompassing women as well as men.

Werbner and Basu (1998) explain that Sufi shrines in South Asia exist alongside post-modern and post-colonial realities. Most prominent South Asian Sufi saints have a history dating back centuries. The legacy of their poetry, literature, and spirituality is respected among the middle and upper classes, but it is the shrine culture that keeps their legacy alive among the masses. The followers believe that the charisma of the dead saints continues to live on through their burial sites. Authors apply Max Weber's ideas of charisma versus rational bureaucracy to South Asian Sufi practices at shrines. They argue that rituals at these shrines not only stem from a belief system but are also a complex set of practices embedded in quotidian ontologies. They refer to Victor Turner's ideas and call pilgrimage as anti-structure and anti-hierarchical acts resulting in 'communitas' or egalitarian sociality.

Another scholar, Katherine Ewing (1983) has written about the importance of shrines in the political context in Pakistan, giving a detailed background of political developments within the country. Local politics in most of

the areas, such as Sehwan, also revolves around the feudal system. Prominent personalities belonging to the feudal elite act as spiritual guides to the people. Ewing argues that both local politics and support by the governments played a big role in the development and maintenance of centuries old shrines and lodges where people congregate for spiritual guidance. Due to political factors and changing socio-cultural customs of the society, centuries old practices of Sufism have also started changing. The political factors focusing on Islamic laws (Sharia) slowly started affecting shrine culture. Ewing's account of how political developments affect shrine culture and the impact of Sufism in contemporary Pakistani society is crucial, particularly in relation to the rise of orthodox and extremist religious politics.

Werbner (2003) also looks at the phenomenon of Sufi culture on a global level in South Asian diasporas in the West. Werbner explores the Zindapir phenomenon of Ghamkol Sharif in Britain where one of his disciples kept Sufi practices alive when he migrated to the UK. There the disciple developed a mosque and started celebrating the urs of Zindapir in which people participate from all over the UK in a march and other rituals. It is interesting to take into account the transnational flows and globalizing

influences of Sufi practices as they are influenced not only by national politics but also transnational movements and geo-politics at the global level.

Some other scholars have looked at women's roles in Sufi culture in South Asia. Shemeem Burney Abbas (2002) has written on the female voice in Sufi musical performances. While most studies done on Sufism end up analyzing participation by male members, Abbas points out that that there is a strong feminine component in Sufi rituals. Abbas conducted her research in Pakistan as well as in Europe and North America among expatriates. She made an attempt to look at transnational influences of Sufism but with a focus on female voice and feminine characters and representations. Her research identifies the position that women have enjoyed in folklore, Sufi poetry, and music in the subcontinent.

Apart from South Asia, scholars have also written on Sufi orders in North Africa, Turkey, and some other parts of the world. Fatima Mernissi (1977) has focused on women's presence in Sufi sanctuaries in Morocco, North Africa. In Mernissi's assessments we can see similar arguments as those put forward by Werbner with regard to the charisma of saints. Mernissi argues that Sufi sanctuaries welcome women and provide a safe haven to them where they can commune

with other women. They are also able to communicate their woes and troubles to a saint (in most cases his burial site) without any fear; they can cry, pray, wail or just simply lie there. Mernissi calls the environment "undeniably therapeutic." She argues that Sufi sanctuaries because of their "therapeutic" role are not religious spaces, "places where orthodox Muslim prayer takes place," but can be considered "anti-establishment" spaces. These spaces allow women to challenge the established structures within the boundaries of the sanctuary. For example, women can complain about patriarchal systems in their families when they come to the sanctuary. As soon as they enter the premises, they can complain and look for solutions to their problems and when they leave the space, "the waves of resentment die at the sanctuary's threshold" (Mernissi, 1977, p.112). Mernissi's analysis of women's role as a marginalized group of society in relation to Sufi sanctuaries provides insights into these spaces as important sociological enterprises.

Other scholars have studied aspects of Sufism in present day South Asia as well as the rest of the Muslim world, focusing on living saints, miracles, healing rituals related to the psychological problems of people, etc. Overall these studies inform us about different spheres of

Sufi culture. Specifically, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is unique because of the aspect of embodied performance in the form of dancing and some other rituals. However, these and other facets of Sufi culture in Sehwan have not received enough attention in the scholarly world. This research project attempts to fill that gap.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Spaces

Shrines are spaces where rituals can be observed and studied in their complex relationship with humans. These spaces are considered sacred in relation to other spaces that exist within the larger societal structures. Mircea Eliade (1959) illustrates a binary relation between the sacred and the profane and posits that sacred and profane are the two states of being or existential situations for people.

For a religious person, sacred space carries special value while for the profane all spaces are homogenous and neutral. The threshold that separates the two spaces is the limit or the boundary that distinguishes and opposes the two worlds. Usually a sign indicates the sacredness of the place, e.g. dome of a shrine. If the sign does not appear it is invoked, e.g. shrine is built around a burial site. Hence, there are techniques to consecrate a space. Sacred places are considered as the center of the world (Eliade, 1959). For a religious person, there are sacred times as well, e.g. the time of a festival, which represents time

that has been sanctified. Sacred time is "indefinitely recoverable and indefinitely repeatable" because every religious festival represents the "re-actualization" of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past (Eliade, 1959, pp. 69-71). The participants in the festival become contemporaries of the mythical event. They emerge from the time constituted by the profane. The religious person believes that he has moved into another time (Eliade, 1959).

Other ideas about the understanding of ritual spaces are reflected in Victor Turner's concepts of "liminality" in his study of initiation rites. Turner draws this term from Arnold Van Gennep's work *rites de passage* in which he explains transition as change of place, state, social position, and age (Turner, 2007). He divides the process of transition into three distinct phases: separation, margin (limen), and aggregation" (Turner, 2007). As a person or a group moves from one state and transitions into another, the middle liminal phase is ambiguous in which societal classifications do not matter. The liminal phase denotes the threshold; a state in which past is left behind and the future is not yet achieved. "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial"

(Turner, 2007, p.89). Turner further posits that during this phase a sense of egalitarianism prevails as ranks and classifications cease to exist. He calls this situation "*communitas*" as opposed to the normative structure of rank and class in a society. He also uses the term "anti-structure" to describe both "liminality" and "*communitas*." *Communitas* thus represents freedom of human capacities from the normative constraints of association with a social group, status or role (Turner, 1982). Many scholars who have studied performance, space, and rituals make use of Victor Turner's concepts to understand and explain complex social phenomena.

The idea of breaking away from the norm can also be found in Mikhail Bakhtin's explanation of medieval carnivals. Bakhtin focused on the grotesque and laughter to differentiate carnivals from official festivals. According to Bakhtin, no period can be just declared as a time for festivities unless something is "added from the spiritual or ideological dimension; without sanction there can be no festivity" (Bakhtin, 2002, p.87). Festivals allow people to emerge out of the existing world order to enter the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.

The immersion and involvement of participants in a social activity such as a festival can also be understood

using Clifford Geertz's concept of "deep play" who draws from Bentham's Theory of Legislation (Geertz, 2005). Clifford Geertz looks at the involvement of stakeholders in a cockfight and describes those situations as "deep play" and "shallow play" where they differ in terms of the level of money, prestige, and status at stake. In deep play, participants are emotionally involved in the main action. The deep play of an activity thus involves everyone.

The importance of spaces in festivals can also be seen in Richard Schechner's (1993) study of the Ramlila festival in Ramnagar, India. The Ramlila is a highly organized religious event revolving around the reenactment of Lord Rama's journey. The Ramlila is performed for a month, over a vast landscape moving from city to village to forest and back to the city as a symbolic triumphant return of Lord Rama. Schechner considers spatial arrangements to be crucial in this social drama along with elements of theatricality and dramaturgy. However, he calls Ramlila not a theater of make believe but of hyper-reality (Schechner, 1993).

Many thinkers including Jean Baudrillard have defined hyper-reality in a postmodern context. Baudrillard defines a situation as hyper-real when the distinction between real and imaginary is lost (Baudrillard, 2001). Baudrillard

gives the example of Disneyland creating a hyper-real in its play of illusion by using themes such as pirates and the future world, creating make-believe. This idea of creating make-believe or hyper-real seems to be true in the Ramlila. It is interesting how imaginary takes over the real, creating the mythic-geographic space of Hindu mythology in Ramlila. An interesting point to note here is the role of everyday. During the ritual performances and dramatic reenactment of the Ramlila, everyday loses attention as people are consumed by the "deep play."

Richard Schechner also distinguishes festivals organized by officials such as the military and those by the general public. He argues that official festivals are well planned, immaculately organized, and perfectly orchestrated for public purview; for example, military march-pasts in stadiums. Public festivals or "unofficial mass gatherings" are more characterized by commotion and open spaces where people can move around freely without any official guidelines, as compared to officially organized events. Festivals and carnivals allow people to be theatrical. They are able to use masks, costumes, banners, and effigies to act out themes that may defy official authority and discipline. The acts of eating drinking, dancing, sloganeering, and moving around freely become

social and political acts if done in defiance of official culture. Usually these festivals give a temporary break from official order and as soon as the festival ends, the old order is restored. Schechner call this period of festivity "liminal period" after which it becomes business as usual.

Bodies

Looking at embodied expression at the Sufi shrines and festivals requires a discussion on body from different perspectives. Historically, ancient Greek cultures prized the concept of an athletic body. Sculptures from the fifth century BC are expressions of an idealization of Greek athletes (Most, 1998). In Western discourse, discussions of the body begin with the ideas of Descartes who distinguished between the body and the soul. He considered the body as a machine directed by the instructions from the soul or mind. This Cartesian dualism became a foundation for Protestant theology, which promoted individualism and scientific rationalization in the West. The slogan, "I think therefore I am" became the principal feature that emphasized the domination of mind over body. This discouraged the irrational, the magical, and the superstitious.

In this regard it is important to look at the concepts of body in the Islamic world. Theocracy that developed and evolved in the centuries after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad had put emphasis on the control of the body. Yet spirituality that developed in Sufism relied on the magical and on the connection of the soul with God through the means of the body. Other Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism also used the body as a medium to meditate.

Christian theology used Cartesianism to advocate asceticism that was meant to free the mind/soul from the constraints of the bodily senses. Hence the idea of the government of the body became important. The soul became the carrier of rationality and spirituality while the body (flesh) was considered a source of irrational passions, unruly emotions, and desires. Hence attempts were made to control the body through the discipline of diet, the science of medicine, meditation, and religious practices. Orthodox Islamic theocracy also used the idea of the body as a source of all evils and hence a locus of control. Sufi practices subscribed to asceticism but allowed pleasures of the body to connect to God.

Foucault points out that disciplinary measures were part of the monasteries, armies, and workshops in the past but in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries the use

of discipline became acceptable practice. These disciplinary measures were different from methods used in slavery. In slavery, discipline was blatantly focused on the body and on the mechanism that made them more useful and obedient. Later, the techniques of discipline became subtler. These disciplinary forces were at work in schools, hospitals, and military organizations. They easily flowed from one node to the other and responded well to new needs such as industrial innovations. Foucault calls them techniques and acts of cunning (Foucault, 1984).

The concept of body in the discourse of orthodox Islam is restricted to the theological regulations in order to civilize the body. In this context, the body can be seen as that of the condemned in Foucauldian terms (Baldwin et al, 2004). While the orthodoxy relying on body politics restricts its performative role Sufism, like eastern philosophies, considers body as a means to express an association with God. Since Sufi rituals allow performance and embodied expression, they find a natural appeal among people. The reason for opposition to Sufi ideology by the orthodoxy could be that "social and political influence of Sufi teachers often threatened the power and privileges of the jurists" (Chittick, 2009, p.27).

In the Western thought, Maurice Merleau-Ponty critiques Descartes' division between mind and body and considers body crucial to the understanding of perception, existence, and sociality (Turner, 1997). Marcel Mauss posits about cultural shaping of the body as "body technique" (Turner, 1997). This challenged the notion of natural body actions by proclaiming that even mundane activities such as walking and sitting are shaped culturally.

Other philosophers like Edmund Husserl, Marx, and Nietzsche also did the critique of Cartesianism (Turner, 1996). Nietzsche put forward the idea of a struggle between instrumental rationalism and everyday sensuality and practicality as opposed to the domination of the latter by the former. Nietzsche considered the reconciliation between the dimensions of sensuality and rationalism important to maintain the balance of life.

As society moved from industrial to post-industrial and post-modern stages, ideas about the body also changed from asceticism to hedonism and sensuality. This changing idea of body from asceticism to expressive bodies is tied to the rise of capitalism and the market economy in contemporary culture. As capitalism took roots in society based on mass consumption, it became comfortable

with a great variety of sexual codes. In order to support consumption, advertising started putting emphasis on the style and form of the body as opposed to the suppression of flesh. Due to consumerism, body became a desirable object.

A Cultural studies approach theorizes about the body as a social entity identifying various performative roles for it. From Hochschild (1983) came the idea of an emotional body. As social beings we are expected to embody certain emotions in certain socio-cultural situations such as feeling happy at parties and sad at funerals (Baldwin et al, 2004). Similarly, the concept of a sporting body in contemporary society gives prominence to the body as an asset. In arts such as dancing, the body becomes a medium of expression.

Scott Kugle (2007) relates the idea of the expressive body to the concept of the body in Sufism referring to the phenomenological approach undertaken by a Moroccan scholar, Farid-al-Zahi. Zahi combines influences from scholars such as Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Eliade, and Lacan in countering the Cartesian split. He defines body in its entirety as a singular and thinking body and a sum of all the different forms of bodies in the Western context (emotional body, sporting body, etc.). Al-Zahi explains body as a whole but comprising four concentric circles: Kugle uses the words

"corps, corporal, corporeal, and corporeality" to define the four circles in the phenomenological scheme of embodiment as defined by Al-Zahi. At the core of the body lies the body matter, the physical being. The core is followed by another circle that represents movement of the body in relation to others in society, the social body. The third layer is driven by the biological needs such as hunger, thirst, sex, etc. The fourth and the outermost layer provides body a meaning and interpretation, "a mental superstructure completing the holistic view of the body" (Kugle, 2007, p. 19). Thus, the body is not just a physical being but becomes a vessel for meanings. "We think through our bodies rather than despite our bodies" (Kugle, 2007, p.21).

Kugle takes Al-Zahi's model of four concentric circles and adds his own interpretation of the body's interaction with ego. This interaction is explained as the four states of consciousness of the body. These four states are: restraint, engagement, rapture, and release. The state of restraint represents ascetic control of the body, engagement denotes active participation in activities such as arts and architecture, rapture explains intimate involvement of the ego with the body in play, games, and dance, and the fourth state is related to biological

functions such as sleep in which the ego releases the body. These states help explain the needs of the body beyond its biological dimensions. Kugle uses his framework of four states of consciousness to explain Sufi practices of asceticism, ecstatic rapture, and ritual engagements (Kugle, 2007).

CHAPTER IV

METHOD

This project is situated in ethnographic research methods of participant observation and open-ended interviews. Ethnographic research considers the researcher as the most important tool in the field who uses his senses to gather data (Fetterman, 2010). The researcher, through the medium of participant observation, makes notes of activities in a natural setting without disrupting the flow of events. The researcher is supposed to interact and converse with human subjects without any obtrusiveness "to minimize the effect on participant behavior" (Fetterman, 2010, p.61). This research project attempted to follow all such norms of ethnographic research methods in the field, the city of Sehwan.

I visited the city of Sehwan three times between June and August 2012. I visited once before the *urs* in June and after the *urs* in August, for two days on each trip. The *urs* started on June 09, 2012 and I stayed in the city for four days. On each visit, two shrines, one of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and the other of his disciple Bodla Bahar, remained primary sites of inquiry and observation. On my visits, I was not only navigating the shrines but also

taking into account the whole city, making notes of some other important places.

During my visits in Sehwan I used the method of participant observation as my primary tool to gain an understanding of the shrine culture. Participant observation method exposes a researcher to a wide array of activities happening at the research site. At Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's *urs* I observed activities, rituals, and ceremonies that were not only exclusive to the *urs* but also to the shrine and culture of Sehwan.

In the participant observation method, it is important to mention the level of involvement. Most researchers who invest years in the field completely immerse themselves in the local culture and lifestyle. This level of immersion depends on a number of factors such as "appearance, language, class, background, manner, ease of interaction style, age, size, gender, race and ethnicity" (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999, p.93). Though cultures within Pakistan differ across regions, they all come under the umbrella of a general national culture. Factors like fluency in the national language worked to my advantage in the field. Being a citizen of Pakistan aware of the customs of the general etiquettes of shrine culture placed me in Sehwan in a stronger position as a researcher.

Due to familiarity with the general culture, I did not have to completely immerse myself in the shrine culture at Sehwan. There are also some activities in which participation is not feasible from the perspective of a personal belief system, ethics, and professionalism. For example, I participated in certain rituals such as *dhamaal* at the shrine while did not participate in other rituals such as self-flagellation or smearing henna on my hands, which are performed by some participants. So I went from complete to partial to non-participation on a continuum in Sehwan. Overall, participant observation allowed me to experience things in Sehwan as a regular visitor without any obtrusiveness.

Non-participatory unobtrusive observations from a distance helped orient myself to the general culture, people's appearances, spaces and their utilities. I visited the city before the *urs* to familiarize myself with the surroundings and hence made observations about the general setting. I had visited the shrine once before in 2010 but this time I was looking at the shrine from a research perspective as a space for rituals, ceremonies, and expressions of devotion.

Everyone makes observations in daily life but a research problem guides an ethnographic researcher to

systematically record information and make use of it later for analysis. In order to systematically record all my observations, I used photography and field notes as tools. I took photographs of spaces, events, rituals, and people. From time to time I used a small notebook in which I made notes of important things that I wasn't able to capture through a camera.

During the *urs* I made observations about the whole city and its expansion to its outer limits. Since I was staying outside Sehwan during the *urs*, it gave me the freedom to look at the expanse of the festival from many vantage points both outside and from within the city. I walked around the city observing different activities happening in the city during the three-day festival. I also spent two nights in Sehwan during the *urs* until early morning particularly to note down morning and night activities.

Apart from participant observation, I conducted exploratory open-ended interviews as well as some informal interviews. The purpose of using unstructured but exploratory interviews was "to explore domains believed to be important to the study" (Schensul et al., 1999, p. 121). The exploratory nature helped me as a researcher, to keep certain important domains in mind and the open format

allowed flexibility to explore new and unexplored domains. In order to keep certain important domains a part of the natural conversation, an interview guide comprising key questions helped me keep my focus on a number of issues and maintain a flow of conversation.

I interviewed male, female, and transgender participants in Sehwan during my three visits. On each visit a female friend accompanied me to assist me in my interviews particularly with female participants. According to traditional societal norms, it is not customary for unrelated male members of the society to approach females and have a conversation with them. Having a female assistant helped me overcome the cultural barriers, as women are more open to talking in the presence of other female company.

I recorded all of my open-ended interviews electronically in my cell phone after seeking permission from the interviewees. As a standard procedure I explained to them the purpose of the study and explained important points of anonymity and confidentiality. All the interviews were conducted in Urdu, the national language widely understood in the country. The interviews were translated and transcribed into English while keeping the identity of the participants anonymous. After transcription, all

interviews were coded and then codes were arranged in categories for analysis.

I used convenient sampling as my selection criteria for my interviewees. Since ethnographic study requires a researcher to avoid any obtrusiveness in the field, convenient sampling allows a researcher to informally approach people for interviews whenever, wherever and whoever he/she finds it appropriate and relevant to the research objectives. "Ethnographers rely on their judgment to select the most appropriate members of a subculture or a unit based on the research question" (Fetterman, 2010, p.35). Other inclusionary criteria of selection were based on the subject being a) over the age of 18, b) fully capable of general consent, and c) not a protected class, such as prisoner, patient or ward.

A typical selection and interview procedure is illustrated in the few examples here. On my first visit I observed a small musical gathering in the courtyard of the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Male, female, and transgender participants sat there enjoying the devotional music by a group of local performers who were singing and playing different local musical instruments. There, I asked a transgender participant for an interview and she agreed.

I decided to move to the courtyard of our host's house nearby for an interview.

On another occasion, during my third visit, I was observing the evening *dhamaal* at Bodla Bahar's shrine. There were a few women dancing at this shrine out of which one woman looked fully involved and almost fell flat on the ground in a state of *haal* (complete ecstasy and trance). Once the *dhamaal* ended most of the participants moved away to rest on a side. My assistant and I sat closer to the woman. My assistant asked the woman if she would be interested in having a conversation with us. She was going to the main shrine where *dhammaal* starts after it ends at the small shrine. I continued to converse with the woman as we walked towards the main shrine. Once we reached the main shrine, she again became involved in prayers and *dhamaal*. After the rituals, I asked her if I could formally have an interview with her and she agreed to come to our host's house. I had a detailed in-depth interview with her that lasted for about an hour.

For any field researcher it is important to contact influential local personalities and stakeholders, sometimes called local gatekeeper in ethnographic research methods. In Sehwan a couple of Syed families who claim their lineage to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, known as Sajjada Nashins, are

important stakeholders. One such Syed was my host on my first visit. He became a very important connection for this research. He not only was generous enough to provide us with a place to stay but he also provided us knowledge and historical background of the shrine, city, and many other political and governmental matters associated with the shrine and its culture and traditions.

I interviewed a professional singer of hymns who was singing at this Syed's house at a function organized by him during the *urs*. On my request, she came to a room on the side where some other guests were also sitting and I conducted the interview. The Syed also helped me in connecting with a *fakir*, Ashraf, who became my key informant and guide. I interviewed Ashraf in detail on my first visit at his own house, a quiet place adjacent to the shrine of Bodla Bahar. I also had another interview session with him at his workspace, a small corner on the side of the shrine where he performs menial job of collecting people's shoes before they enter the shrine. In the sweltering heat of 110 Fahrenheit, my assistant and I ate with other *fakirs* and *malangs*, immersing us in the experience of the fakir lifestyle. I developed a rapport with him, which is considered one of the essential elements

of the ethnographic method. I continued to meet him for informal conversations on my subsequent visits.

Apart from these four main interviews I had informal interviews with people in groups. I conducted these interviews as I was moving around the city during the *urs*. I visited a house which was rented by a group of men and two transgender participants visiting from Lahore and Faisalabad. I found another house where a group of transgender participants were congregated. I had brief conversations with two of them. I also interviewed two men who were hanging out with the transgender group. On another occasion I found a place to stand on the top right of the main courtyard to make observations about the ceremonies. There, I interviewed a group of women, also from Faisalabad, who were also sitting observing the rituals from the top.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

This chapter provides details about the shrine culture in Sehwan uncovered through the process of participant observation and exploratory interviews before, during, and after the *urs*. It outlines details about the city of Sehwan, shrines, festival, participants, and their activities and motives.

The City. Sehwan is a small city with clear identifiable boundaries and is surrounded by plain lands. The significance of Sehwan is due to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, which is the center of all activities. All the main roads as well as narrow lanes seem to lead to the shrine.

The shrine is a large structure that can be seen from a long distance. The central structure of the shrine has a big golden dome with four minarets. There are two main entrances to the shrine. On one entrance, a golden gate has been installed which is kept closed most of the time. Another small gate next to the golden gate is kept open to facilitate visitors coming from this side. The other entrance has a long courtyard where all ritual activities including *dhamaal* are performed. During the *urs* this area is full of activities twenty-four hours of the day. Many

devotees, men, women and children, visiting from outside the city stay overnight in the courtyard during normal days. During the *urs* visitors belonging to lower socio-economic strata set up tents in open grounds in and around the city. Walking through the city near these areas becomes very difficult as people with their families set up their portable beds and sleep, some under the tents and some under the open skies.

Two roads leading to the entrances are lined with small shops selling food items, artifacts, clothes, decorated shrouds, beads, and many other items. The commercial activity remains operational late into the night during normal days and twenty-four hours during the *urs*. During the *urs*, all the commercial activity increases manifold as many other vendors also set up their temporary stalls to cater to the influx of thousands of visitors. Also, the limits of the city expand as people use all areas adjacent to and surrounding the city to stay.

Numerous other peripheral shrines and cultures exist and thrive in the city because of their association with the saint. Among such places is the shrine of Bodla Bahar. This shrine is small in size and much less elaborate compared to the main shrine in terms of its structure, design, and decoration. Located adjacent to Bodla Bahar's

shrine are lodges for *fakirs* and *malangs* who live there. While the Auqaaf department of the Government of Pakistan looks after Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, these *fakirs* take care of Bodla Bahar's shrine. Most people who visit Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine also visit Bodla Bahar's Shrine.

Participants. The small city of Sehwan completely transforms during the *urs* as thousands of devotees throng to the city. People from all over the country and abroad come throughout the year but the *urs* has special significance for participants. Participants who visit also belong to different sects of Islam. A large percentage of participants come from the Punjab province, the largest province of Pakistan. While all year round it is convenient for the residents of Sindh to visit the shrine, but during the *urs*, especially the first two days, their numbers decrease comparatively. A resident of an adjacent town informed me, "Most Sindh residents make room for people from Punjab and other parts of the country." Most of the people I contacted for interviews during the *urs* were from Punjab.

Participants come in groups in various buses during the *urs*. These visitors rent out rooms in houses and hotels. One such visitor, Cheema, came from Lahore, capital

city of the Punjab province. He came with male and a few transgender pilgrims from Lahore and another city in Punjab, Faisalabad. I interviewed him in a room he was sharing with ten male and two transgender participants. He explained the process, "We come in *sangats* (groups) of about hundred people... we rent rooms and about ten people stay in each room." Cheema belongs to the lower middle-income group and owns a small restaurant business in Lahore. He did not bring his wife and children at the *urs* because he did not want them to suffer inconvenience due to over-crowdedness in the city. He claimed that he brought them during normal days. He has been attending the *urs* for the last twenty years.

Other than groups of men, groups of women and families also come to attend the *urs*. I interviewed a group of women who came from Faisalabad. Another group of women performers, dancers and singers, from Lahore and some other cities were staying at Syed's house, the city's influential member. I interviewed a woman performer, Sana, from that group at Syed's house. I had an informal interview with another woman also staying there who forced her husband to accompany her on the trip, as he did not believe strongly in the shrine culture. Groups of women also come during

normal days. I interviewed a woman, Rida, who came with her sisters and nieces a month after the *urs*.

Transgender participants come in groups. I met a group of transgender individuals also from Punjab. Some of them mentioned that they dress up as male members in their daily life and change demeanors to perform at musical functions on weekends or at nights. Most of them belong to the lower income group doing menial jobs during the day and doing dance performances at night. One such participant claimed that he had been supporting his mother and sisters after his father's death. Some of these members also indulge in prostitution to eek out a living. Transgender participants also visit during normal days. I interviewed one such participant on my first visit.

Though majority of the participants at the *urs* come from Punjab, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa provinces, many travel from different parts of the Sindh province as well. I encountered a group of men walking on foot from another district in Sindh to reach the city. Some walk long distances due to economic reasons but for others it is a matter of belief to bear hardships on their pilgrimage journey to Qalandar's shrine.

Apart from participants who come from different parts of the country, there are *fakirs* and *malangs* who stay in

Sehwan and take care of Bodla Bahar's shrine. One such mendicant, Ashraf, has dedicated his life to his patron saint, Bodla Bahar. These mendicants believe in practicing an ascetic lifestyle. "In order to gain something one has to lose something," Ashraf said explaining the idea of not caring about worldly possessions to gain spirituality. Referring to the life of struggle of saints he said, "These saints did not sit in air-conditioned offices." Ashraf also called himself a dog and a *kanjiri*. He used both words to show his humility and lower status compared to the saints. Rida also used exactly same words to describe her position compared to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's stature and to show her dedication. Most of these participants believe in the importance of the saint in their quest to find God. "One cannot find God by merely reciting *Allah Allah*... it is *Wali Allah* (Friends of God) who help us connect to God," explained Rida. Cheema thinks that people visit these shrines because these saints were friends of God (*Wali Allah*), "It is our good luck that Lal Shahbaz came to our country."

Participants also consider these spaces as sanctuaries where inner peace and tranquility can be achieved. Despite extreme temperatures and poor living conditions, Ashraf thinks that people find peace here, "When people come and

walk barefoot to the tomb their feet burn in the scorching heat but as soon as they enter inside the shrine they feel at peace... they come out and their feet burn again." For some participants the place also offers a chance to vent. They go to the shrine and cry uncontrollably.

Some visitors come just because they heard a lot about the *urs*. Some of these participants consider behavior at the *urs* deviant and not amenable to orthodox Islamic practices. Two such participants from Faisalabad forwarded me an invitation to come to Faisalabad where they would take me to another shrine where "no bad activities take place." They also derided the presence of transgender individuals at the *urs* and said, " You won't find these transgender people there in that shrine." A resident of the Sehwan city who rented his house to pilgrims also condemned the shrine culture calling it aberrant and unIslamic.

Despite these opposing voices, most people come and participate in rituals because of their devotion to the saint. Sana claims that she has been attending the festival since she became an adult. "We wait for Lal's *urs* the whole year... In Lal's love the whole country comes," exclaimed Sana. Sana also comes at times other than the *urs* for saying *salaam*, greeting, to the saint. Participants who come to attend the *urs* feel they have a special call from

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Sana said, "He calls whoever he wants, even someone sitting in London, Europe, America will come if he calls."

Dhamaal. *Dhamaal* performance takes place in the evening throughout the year as well as during the *urs* at the shrines of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Bodla Bahar. It starts with a small ceremony at the shrine of Bodla Bahar as soon as the evening call for prayer ends. *Malangs* in their red robes gather and perform *dhamaal* to the beat of drums. They move their hands and feet, one at a time, forward and backward in a rhythm. They continue the steps and after a while, upon getting a cue from a faster beat of drums, they whirl round and round. The whole procedure is repeated a few times after which *dhamaal* ends at Bodla Bahar. Some men and women other than *malangs* also participate in *dhamaal* but primary performers are *malangs* at Bodla Bahar's shrine. During the performance, one person chants the praise of Ali or Qalandar in a loud voice to which all others give an appropriate response in chorus. These chants known as *naara* have standard words and are said to elicit standard replies e.g. one call is *naara-e-haideri* (call for Haider) and the standard response is *Ya Ali* (O Ali). This is a common practice at both the shrines.

When the evening *dhamaal* ends at Bodla Bahar, another bigger *dhamaal* starts at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Everyone performs at this shrine, as the space is bigger. The courtyard of the shrine is full of people as evening *dhamaal* starts. Male participants occupy the majority of the courtyard area while certain areas are designated for female devotees. Some male members protect the areas designated for female participants. They move other male members away who stare at women performing. They also stop people from taking photographs of women performing *dhamaal*.

The energy in all sections is high as people perform together remembering a practice done by Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. People perform *dhamaal* with their hands up in the air, their eyes closed, and their heads moving back and forth to the beats of drums and *shehnai*, a sub-continental wind instrument played mostly at weddings. Some men and women appear to reach a state of trance. This is when they lose control of themselves and start moving their bodies back and forth faster than usual while moving their head back and forth even faster. This state of trance is called *haal*. After a few minutes, most people who experience a state of *haal* pass out. Their family or friends then take care of them. If a woman becomes unconscious then she is

taken to one side of the courtyard. Those in charge of managing people take utmost care to safeguard the respect and honor of women performers.

During the *urs* the number of devotees increase multiple times as does the energy of the place. *Dhamaal* is performed not only in the evening but also at the crack of dawn. These two events of *dhamaal* are the biggest events of the *urs*. People come from far and wide from within and outside the country to be a part of *dhamaal*. *Dhamaal* is usually performed within the space of the shrine, but during the *urs* the space of the shrine seems to extend as devotees gather in different nooks and corners of the city and perform. Most of these small gatherings comprise male members and in some cases transgender members also participate. I found one small gathering in a narrow lane of the city where a group of female members were doing *dhamaal* but male members heavily protected them. Any outsider trying to get close to the performance area was asked to move away.

Apart from the main formal *dhamaal* gatherings at the two shrines, myriad other informal small gatherings and functions are arranged in the houses of influential members of the community and different other houses throughout the city. In most of these functions performers who specialize

in singing hymns in the praise of God, Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali, and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar participate. This creates more activities for visitors. It also gives amateur performers a chance to showcase their talent. Some women and transgender participants also perform *dhamaal* at these functions. The difference in *dhamaal* at these functions is that performers are mostly professionals and steps are a bit choreographed. They also dance to a wide assortment of musical instruments instead of just drums and *shehnai*.

Men, women, and transgender participants all attribute their dancing to the pull and charisma of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Sana, who was singing hymns at a local function organized by Syed, said, "Those who do not even think of dancing end up dancing in Lal's love...he is Ali's Lal... he can get this done." Sana considers doing *dhamaal* a matter of belief. She is fanatical about Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and that's the reason why she likes performing at the *urs*. "When Lal's love comes over my head then I don't know anything... why should I care about other people when I am at Lal's place," explained Sana.

Some of the professional singers and dancers, who normally sing and dance to earn money, perform at the *urs* as an obligation. Sana proclaimed that it is their "duty" every year to come and perform at Lal's *urs*. Talking about

her friend who danced at the function at Syed's house predominantly attended by male members, she commented about her friend's bold performance, "She didn't care about her clothes and any other thing... she didn't feel shy... she did it in Lal's love." While her friend performed a rather choreographed *dhamaal*, male audience members, mostly influential and rich, threw wads of cash on the performer, which was collected by another woman, part of the troupe. Throwing money on a performer is a tradition practiced in many parts of South Asia.

Most transgender individuals in Pakistan adopt the profession of singing and dancing. They perform at small functions, gatherings, marriage ceremonies, birthday parties, circus, variety shows, etc. Some transgender participants were also in the city coming mainly from Punjab to perform at small functions that are organized in different parts of the city other than the main and peripheral shrines. Among those, one participant considered coming to the *urs* a "*shughal*" (a hobby/fun activity). This group was dressed up in shiny bright clothes, wore artificial jewelry, and excessive amounts of make-up. Some of them wore slightly revealing clothes showing their arms, backs and cleavage. Dressed to the nines, they fluttered around neighborhoods predominantly occupied by male

participants. I interviewed a transgender participant, on my visit before the *urs*, who was dressed very simply and performed *dhamaal* at the shrine, and denied doing it for money. "We earn all year long and come and dance here not for earning."

It is not just professional singers and dancers who perform *dhamaal* at the shrine. Some women who come with their families also perform *dhamaal*. Most of such women also belong to the lower income group as inferred from their attire. Some middle class women who are dressed up in rather new and slightly expensive clothes were also seen performing. One such woman, Rida, who is a homeopathic doctor by profession, was doing *dhamaal* at the shrine of Bodla Bahar. She explained the dancing ritual as the unique characteristic of the saint. "This is Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's power, he is getting this (performance) done...this is king's (Lal Qalandar's) own power and human will has got nothing to do with it," reasoned Rida. Sana also believes that this dancing is Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's miracle, "This is Allah's gift to Lal." According to Cheema, a male participant, " Everyone does *dhamaal* because it is a feeling that comes from within."

When probed about general the public, including unrelated men, watching women dance Rida replied, "For a

fakir, it doesn't matter who is on either side... he/she doesn't see but just goes on in his/her own *masti* (intoxication)". Rida, being a practicing Sufi, also associated the philosophy of remembrance of God while performing. "Let people watch us... some people make fun of women and don't even consider this a (legitimate) prayer. When I was doing *dhamaal* and people were seeing me performing *dhamaal* but I was doing remembrance of God as in reciting *Allah Hu Allah Hu* (a way of remembering God). When I moved my hands forward I meant *Allah Hu*, and backwards I meant *Allah Hu*... I was intoxicated... I was doing the remembrance of God with such intensity that I didn't care about the world," philosophized Rida.

Another *fakir* at the shrine of Bodla Bahar explained the Sufi philosophy behind everyone's participation in *dhamaal*. "This is *tariqat* (the way of Sufis). All men and women sitting here together is *tariqat*. In *Sharia* this cannot happen (hinting with the gesture of hands at women participants freely moving around). This is about humanity," he asserted.

Some of these participants regularly visit other shrines in the country as well. While *Dhamaal* is performed at some other shrines, but Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine is considered unique for these performances. "We go to other

shrines such as Shah Noorani but this color is nowhere to be found," said Sana.

Other Rituals. Other than *dhamaal*, there are other important rituals. The first activity that any visitor performs is going to the main shrine and saying salaam (greeting) to the saint. Most visitors try to get as close and touch the grave of the saint. Some women sit within the tomb and sing hymns. Some people recite verses from the Holy Quran and pray for their needs. Everyone can pray in the way they want. " Shiite, Sunni Wahhabi... everyone comes here and prays according to his/her own way," Cheema explained, when talking about the diversity of praying methods.

The most prevalent method of praying at Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's or his disciple's shrine is called *mannat*. In *mannat*, a person prays for something and then pledges to do something in return if the wish is fulfilled. Some people pledge to offer a *chador* (embroidered shroud to cover the grave) at the shrine, some pledge to serve food to the poor, and some simply tie red (color associated with Lal) threads around their wrists. Cheema explained, "I come and do *mannat*. As soon as my wishes are fulfilled I come back and fulfill my pledge such as offering a *daig* (big pot of food that serves about 3-4 dozen people)." One woman who

came from Faisalabad said, "We come for *mannat* and all our wishes are granted here." Sana said, "We just pray in front of Lal and our problems get resolved. Why should I get worried about anything?" Orthodoxy condemns the concept of *mannat* calling it denying the supremacy of God by deifying saints and praying to them instead of God. One woman assertively defended the concept of *mannat*, "We ask God but the saint is just a source of connection to God."

Another important ritual is offering something at the grave of the saint. Some people bring flowers and some bring a *chador*, a decorated shroud, to cover the grave. Some people also leave money there. At the *urs*, the act of offering a *chador* is significant. Most groups bring one *chador* along with them either from their city or purchase it from the local marketplace. For example, Cheema and his group brought one big red *chador* which they put on display in one of the houses rented by them for three days, before taking it to the shrine and offering it there. Some of them spend thousands on the decoration of the *chador*. These shrouds are inscribed with verses from the Quran, poetry and praise for Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali, and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar along with beautiful decorative patterns and shapes. Some of these *chadors* are made of gold threads. The ritual is to take *chador* through the narrow lanes of the

city held by the people of the group before offering it at the shrine. Some influential families have their own designated days and time for bringing their *chadors* to the shrine.

Another important ritual is of *mehndi*. *Mehndi* is the ceremony that usually happens at weddings in South Asian cultures. The families of groom and bride take *mehndi*, henna, to each other's house. Since the *urs* is considered an occasion of the saint's wedding to God, people carry henna on trays and take it to the shrine. Some people carry other feminine items such as bangles in trays along with the henna. People also bring these items in groups and offer them at the shrine. Some people smear henna on their hands and heads.

Though the *urs* is considered a festive occasion but some Shiite participants indulge in mourning and self-flagellation similar to practices done in the Islamic month of Muharram to mourn the murder of Husain. In the courtyard where *dhamaal* is performed, one or two groups continue to sing elegies remembering the death of Husain, son of 'Ali, in the battle of Karbala. While they sing they use their hands to beat their chests. Some groups use knives and other sharp objects for self-flagellation. The same courtyard is the route for hoards of people taking their

chadors and *mehndi* to the shrine. All of these activities take place simultaneously. With so many rituals happening, the *urs* becomes an important site of pilgrimage and performances for the masses.

CHAPTER VI

ANALYSIS

This chapter analyzes the *urs* in Sehwan through the theoretical lenses outlined in chapter III. The discussion revolves around space, performance, and embodied expression.

Space

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is one of the most venerated saints in Pakistan. This becomes apparent when one visits the city of Sehwan where his tomb is located. The way city space is structured in Sehwan, it makes the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar the city's center. Architecture of the shrine also adds to the high stature associated with him. With its high walls decorated with blue tiles, a gold plated gate, a golden dome, and minarets, the shrine stands out in the city with typically single storied town houses and small shops. All the activities - spiritual, cultural, and commercial - revolve around this space. The space of his shrine is considered the most sacred within the larger cityscape. Within this space is another sacred center, which is the tomb of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar.

Shrine space in Sehwan can be compared to the picture of our solar system in which the sun is in the center and everything revolves around it; the large and elaborate structure of the shrine in the city is like sun in our solar system. Mircea Eliade (1961) argues that the sacred always takes a central position in space. Similarly, Qalandar's shrine becomes a sacred center from which all the energy in Sehwan seems to emanate. Within this center, the tomb is the focal point of sanctity and sacredness.

Sehwan is a small city with a population of about 50,000 inhabitants (Ansari, 2011). The Sufi festival transforms the small rural town into a space that accommodates half a million devotees, according to conservative estimates (Ansari, 2011). Here, Richard Schechner's (1993) analysis of Ramlila festival in India can be useful in looking at the transformation of time and space. Like the Ramlila festival, the scale of this festival is also so large that activities spread out to all nooks and corners of the city. During the *urs* the city, swarmed by thousands of devotees, starts teeming with activities. The whole city transforms, resulting in an extension in its space. The activities that are generally limited to the shrine extend to different parts of the city taking in its folds adjoining areas.

In Sehwan activities continue late into the night during normal days but during the *urs* it becomes a twenty-four hour cycle for three days. During the *urs* the shrine remains as crowded at night as it is during the day. Outside the shrine many individual functions are arranged that also keep pilgrims involved. Commercial activities also contribute to keeping the city alive and buzzing. Night and day merge into each other as for three days people lose track of time. This extension of time and space creates a mythic ground for various rituals to be performed.

The *Urs* is not just about the sacred but carnivalesque, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, also becomes an important component of the festival in the city space. People come not just to be a part of rituals at the shrine but they also to indulge in other activities associated with carnivals and festivals. The existence of everyday activities such as playing games, eating, and socializing exist side by side with religious, traditional, and spiritual rituals. The marketplace buzzes with activities for all participants. In addition to this, many participants indulge in activities such as taking drugs and other intoxicants. Carnival space allows deviation to be normative behavior.

The city space transforms and opens up possibilities in a carnival environment, allowing participants to deviate or accept deviations. For instance, in this festival, some transgender participants roam around all dressed up in loud colors, heavy make-up, and flashy jewelry. In normal circumstances such a display of excessiveness and gender fluidity would not be accepted but the carnivalesque aspect of the *urs* makes this possible.

Also during the *urs*, the same space builds a new community as people from different parts of the country congregate in Sehwan. They speak different regional languages and belong to different regional cultures. They belong to different sects and religions. Even those who do not believe in shrine culture co-exist with other participants. Though there may be differences of opinions and an inherent tension among different religious ideologies, this remains largely latent at the *urs*. At night, parts of the city where tents or sleeping areas are set up portray another interesting aspect of the festival. Most people sleep on the ground with their families and friends, creating a communal space. The cityscape is transformed into a space where participants share *communitas*, as defined by Victor Turner as area of common living (Turner, 2004). Whether this *communitas* is truly

achieved in this space, or even desired by participants, considering differences among groups of people, can be another important question for further research.

Performance

Many rituals are performed during the *urs* in the extended space of Sehwan city. These rituals have set and formal patterns which have been developed over the centuries. These rituals draw their influences from various cultures that have flourished in the Indus Valley civilization. These include influences from the Islamic, Sufi, and Hindu traditions. These rituals are also embedded in quotidian practices as largely country's poorest come to attend the *urs*. These rituals give participants an avenue to express their spirituality in public sphere.

During normal days devotees don't emphasize as much exhibition of their rituals. For example most people who want to offer a shroud at the grave of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar either bring it with them or buy one from the market, simply walk up to the tomb, and offer it. The same ritual becomes grand during the *urs*. People bringing shrouds in large groups no longer remains the ritual of an individual or a family unit. It becomes a collective offering. The group starts moving from a far distance in the form of a procession and proceeds through the narrow lanes of Sehwan

city while chanting slogans and singing hymns. While they move through the city, onlookers admire the shrouds and the enthusiasm of the participants. Multiple groups crisscross paths on their way to the shrine, competing for space and people's attention. This process continues throughout the day and night.

Performance can also be seen in the ritual of *mehndi*, carrying and applying henna. Women come in groups all dressed up for this ritual; some groups of men also participate. They carry big decorated trays of henna, bangles, and other items associated with the ceremony of *mehndi* at weddings. They also come in processions flaunting their goods, carrying them to the shrine. *Mehndi* is generally associated with women in South Asian cultures and therefore women participate in these rituals according to the local traditions without anybody raising any societal objections.

Women and transgender pilgrims participate in many other performances, making this Sufi discourse different in terms of gender representations. In many orthodox gatherings, women's participation is absent or marginal. Even if women are permitted to participate in some cases, rituals are embedded in rigid theological structures that suppress any opportunity for women to be expressive.

Theology also does not permit dilution of religious rituals by traditions and cultures. Participation of transgender members is even beyond question at orthodox gatherings. Rituals at shrines on the other hand take influences from various traditional practices giving marginalized groups a chance to be active participants.

Overall, the *urs* space becomes a ground for the performance of many rituals for participants from the poor strata of the society. One participant referred to pilgrimage at the *urs* as, "Mini Hajj." Hajj is an obligatory ritual for all Muslims to perform once in their lifetime but the cost of performing Hajj is astronomical which majority of the poor Pakistanis cannot afford. In this context, pilgrimage at the *urs* gives its participants an opportunity to perform rituals that fulfill their religious and spiritual desires and aspirations. For example, during Hajj, participants circumambulate the four-walled structure of the *Kaaba* in Mecca. Similarly, some participants walk around the tomb of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Thus rituals provide an outlet for the poor for performances. However, the most unique ritual at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is the performance of *dhamaal*.

Embodied Expression

Dhamaal is the ecstatic devotional dance, which allows its participants an embodied form of expression. Dance is usually not the term used to define this performance. However, it may be called dance if defined in terms of our understanding of dance as an art form and our modern present day use of language. Dancing is not explicitly allowed under the legal regulations set by the theologians in orthodox Islam. In Sufism, on the other hand, dervishes often perform ecstatic dance. In the subcontinent, dance as an art form flourished under Mughal Muslim rulers. However, this condemnation by the clergy has always clouded people's perception about dancing. In current day Pakistan, people belonging to respectable middle-class or even lower class families and particularly women prefer not to perform dance in public. Most dance performances are performed (other than professional ones) at weddings and others private gatherings. Professional dance performances are also looked down upon and are associated with prostitutes and people of low social groups. Hence, spaces in Sehwan are unique because the same bodies that normally shy away from expressing themselves in public find a ground for performance in the public sphere irrespective of their gender, class, and ethnic differences.

This expressive body at the *urs* is different from the condemned body under the regulations of Islamic orthodoxy and the traditions of a conservative society. To understand this, we now look at various factors that allow the body of a participant to become an expressive body:

Sacredness: Participants interviewed for this research attributed performance of *dhamaal* to the sacredness of the saint. Most people attributed it to the love, power and charisma of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar on one level and the love and remembrance of God on a higher level. Eliade posits that a place does not become sacred itself but different acts consecrate it. Sacredness of the shrine space comes from Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's repute as a friend of God. Participants interviewed for this study cited his association with the family of the Holy Prophet as one of the main reasons of his veneration. Many legends and miracles have also been linked with him that raise his stature among all the saints who are buried in Pakistan. All of these facets consecrate the burial site of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar as one of the most sacred sites of Sufi Islam in Pakistan.

People honor him and the sacredness of his dance by performing in public. Women in particular were very vehement about their veneration of the saint when

attributing their reasons of this embodied expression. They did not quote any ideas of freedom, resistance, or emancipation when asked to describe their feelings except their devotion to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. People's perception of sacredness makes bodies lose their inhibitions and be expressive bodies.

Non-Verbal Discourse: Language is one of the key components of most religious rituals. For example, singing hymns or reciting holy verses requires verbal expression. Some rituals are a combination of verbal and non-verbal expressions. For instance, when Muslims offer prayer they use their body parts but do so along with the recitation of verses. Even in the Sufi ritual of *Samaa*, music is combined with the play of words from poetry. In this context in Sehwan, the ritual of *dhamaal* is unique because it is devoid of any verbal element. Here in the space of the shrine, thousands of devotees gather and move their bodies to express their spiritual connection to the saint and God. The absence of any influence of language makes *dhamaal* a unique expression of spirituality in Islamic cultures. This gives agency to the body. In doing so, this non-verbal discourse of expression does not discriminate among gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Anyone who can respond to the beat of drums can be a part of the collective expression.

Hyper-real & Liminality: Spaces within the shrine and the city of Sehwan undergo a dramatic transformation due to the influx of people during the *urs*. They all participate in the performance of many rituals. The whole space exhibits high energy with its facets of drama and performance. The atmosphere creates a hyper-real resulting in the involvement of all those present there. This hyper-real subsumes the everyday needs of people within it. People do not care whether they are sleeping on the ground or not sleeping at all. For a couple of days they survive in an overcrowded city under extreme weather conditions.

When devotees come to the *urs* or to visit the shrine they remain in a state of transition. *Urs* or a visit to the shrine is thus a liminal phase betwixt and between opening the space up and making people forget about their worldly concerns. As one male participant said, "We forget all our business and other concerns as soon as we enter Sehwan." In this liminal phase people use their bodies to express their love for the saint and the Divine. Men, women, and transgender participants who carry certain obligations to follow decorum with regard to their bodies in society, disregard such norms as soon as they enter the space of the shrine. For female participants, sacredness of the space and liminality of their existence is enough to disregard

male gaze. One female participant said, "I don't care who is looking at me when I am here."

The hyper-real in the city space takes everyone in its folds making them a part of this performance. As one female participant said, "Those who do not even want to dance end up dancing." The high energy of this hyper-real thus involves people in "deep play" as proposed by Geertz.

Sufi Ideology: Sufi ideology itself gives agency to the body. When Sufism started, its ascetic movement relied on restraint on the body. As the movement of Sufism grew, Sufis began appreciating the body and its beauty as the manifestation of God's names and attributes. Sufis then in a way countered Jurists who saw the body as a source of evil. The Sufi body transcends the doctrinal demands and lives through its very existence. Sufi discourse engages the body because of which the body is capable of feeling a range of emotions from restraint to rupture. The Sufi body also engages with its environment, which explains its participation in the rituals. The Sufi body may then be termed as an expressive body.

Sufism allows its expressive body to experience feelings through its movement. In Sufism dancing is considered as the movement of the body when the soul attempts to travel in a spiritual journey (Chittick, 2009).

This added dimension of spirituality transcends the body's movement from other expressions such as dancing for pleasure. It is the same transcendence that Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and some other saints are said to have achieved. Association of ideological dimensions of Sufism with Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's dance makes it acceptable for people to experience it within the space of his shrine. This is the reason why the body of a pilgrim at the *urs* of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and within the space of his shrine is able to express something that may not hold as much acceptance outside.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The occasion of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's death anniversary creates a unique cultural discourse of Sufism in Sehwan. Thousands congregate in the city space to pay homage to their patron saint. For three days pilgrims turn the small city into a festive space where spiritual, cultural, social, and commercial activities thrive. Within this space the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is the center of attraction.

The shrine is the most sacred space in the city of Sehwan for devotees to perform many rituals including ecstatic dancing, *dhamaal*. Pilgrims express their devotion by dancing to the beats of drums. Men, women, and transgender use their bodies in the public sphere, together in the same space, which is unheard of within the traditional conventions of Pakistani society. The agency of the body to be expressive is granted by the sacredness associated with the saint. The body follows conventions of the society and rules of the orthodox doctrine outside the shrine. As soon as the body enters the premises of the shrine it crosses the societal threshold and enters the sacred. The moment of expression for the body is transient

though. However, even this momentary lapse of embodied expression gives voice to the voiceless without using the conventions of language. The non-verbal collective expression involves sexes, sects, and ethnicities.

The expressive body within the ideological dimensions of Sufism in Sehwan represents diversity within Islamic cultures that are generally perceived as monolithic. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine in Sehwan as a site of annual pilgrimage presents a glance into diverse yet complex cultures. The subject is complex because it involves dimensions of tradition, religion, culture, and politics. These dimensions crisscross with issues of gender, class, identity, and spirituality. Among these complexities, this thesis project has attempted to examine the site of the body and its relation to the spaces. This may open scope for future scholarship and inquiry related to Sufi discourse in Sehwan and elsewhere.

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